

The SECOND WORLD WAR in EUROPE.

WHAT WAS BLITZKRIEG?

Soldiers moved rapidly from place to place. Once an attack was launched, hundreds of kilometres could be covered in a day. The country which had a good supply of tanks and aeroplanes and knew how to make the best use of them would be bound to win. Blitzkrieg means 'lightning war', these tactics were used with devastating effect by the Germans from 1939 to 1941. What they did was to launch a surprise attack, move at very great speed and use overwhelming strength at certain key positions. The first move of the Blitzkrieg came from the air. Dive bombers would destroy important positions: railway junctions, crossroads, airfields. If there were any strategic key positions which might be useful to the invaders, parachutes troops would be dropped. Ground troops would invade soon after the first bombs exploded. The invasion would be made up of fast-moving and well-armed columns of tanks. Behind them would come the motorised infantry. With their communications in chaos, the defenders would find it almost impossible to organise defence in time. Within hours defeat would be unavoidable.

The PHONEY WAR, SEPTEMBER of 1939 to APRIL of 1940.

Hitler had begun the war by invading Poland. The Russians invaded Poland from the east as they had agreed in the Nazi-Soviet Pact. Polish territory was divided between the USSR and Germany.

The bombing raids which were expected to destroy British cities didn't come. There were naval engagements, such as the Battle of the River Plate in which the German battleship *Graf Spee* was sunk. German U-boats moved out into the Atlantic and began to sink British shipping.

The USSR became involved in a war with Finland. the 'Winter War' of 1939 and 1940, which took Russia a long time to win. The British called this period 'the Phoney War' because nothing seemed to be happening.

Hitler wasn't yet fully equipped to take on a major war. The British were certainly not prepared, while the French were putting all their faith in their massive defence system, known as the Maginot Line.

The FALL of WESTERN EUROPE, from APRIL to JUNE of 1940.

The Norwegian campaign April 1940, Hitler launched an attack against Denmark and Norway. He set up a Norwegian as a puppet ruler in Norway, a pattern soon to be repeated elsewhere in Europe. Hitler had been shipping Swedish iron ore to Germany along the coast of Norway, and he needed to protect this route. The British decided to mine the coastal waters of Norway. Hitler began to push northwards. An Anglo-French expedition was sent to help the Norwegians. It was a failure.

Winston Churchill becomes Prime Minister.

In early May the British Parliament turned against Chamberlain and he resigned. Churchill became Prime Minister.

France attacked.

The Germans launched a Blitzkrieg attack against the Low Countries and France. German tanks rolled swiftly across Holland and Belgium. Other troops attacked France through the Ardennes region avoiding the Maginot Line. Holland surrendered within five days. Eight days later Belgium surrendered.

Dunkirk.

The British Expeditionary Force had been sent across the Channel, but the French, Dutch and Belgians found it difficult to work together. The British troops were sent reeling back to the Channel port of Dunkirk. There, the French prepared to make a stand while the British sent hundreds of boats across the Channel to take their soldiers off the beaches. This evacuation was called Operation Dynamo.

The BATTLE OF BRITAIN, from JULY to DECEMBER of 1940.

Hitler had hoped that Britain would accept surrender terms. But Churchill had made his attitude clear defend the island whatever the cost may be. At this time Britain was the only country at war with Germany.

Hitler prepared plans for an invasion to England which he called Operation Sea-Lion. The 30 to 40 km of England Channel separating his forces from England was a difficult barrier to cross. Invasion barges waited on the French coast, they were slow vessels, easily attacked from the air.

Before operation Sea-Lion could take place, the Luftwaffe had to be in control of the skies above the Channel. The Battle of Britain in August 1940 was a battle between the Luftwaffe and the RAF for his control of the air. The Luftwaffe aimed to bomb airfields and shoot down fighters so that the RAF would be put out of action. The Luftwaffe had more fighters and pilots than the RAF.

The RAF had two advantages: The Spitfire fighter was more manoeuvrable and better armed than the Messerschmitt, although by no means all the fighter squadrons had Spitfires. Also the RAF had radar (radio detection and ranging). By 1940 it could supply information on aircraft 25 kilometres away. The RAF was rarely caught on the ground.

At the end of August, the RAF was still able to carry on fighting. On 23 August German planes accidentally dropped some bombs on London. The next night Churchill ordered the first air raid on Berlin. Hitler then ordered the Luftwaffe to switch targets from British airfields to British cities. However, on 17 September, Hitler called off Operation Sea-Lion.

EVENTS from JANUARY to DECEMBER of 1941.

Invasion of Russia.

It was Hitler's greatest mistake, but the USSR had always been Hitler's main enemy. He detested the Russians as Communists, he loathed them as Slavs, an 'inferior race'.

EASTERN EUROPE.

Western Europe was safely conquered, except for Britain. Hitler now turned to Eastern Europe.

Austria, most of Czechoslovakia and half of Poland had been taken into Germany in 1938 and 1939. Most of the rest of eastern Europe regarded the USSR as a greater menace. In 1939-1940, the USSR had seized all of Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, half of Poland and slices of Finland and Romania.

Germany, Japan and Italy had signed a Tripartite Pact in September 1940. The remaining independent countries of the eastern Europe now hurried to seek protection from the USSR by joining this pact. By early 1941, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria had joined. The whole of the mainland of Europe was now either occupied by Germany or by one of its allies or was neutral.

ITALY ENTERS the WAR.

By 1940 Hitler was so successful that Mussolini was afraid he would miss out on the rewards if he didn't join in. He declared war on Britain and France ten days before the fall of France. The Italians troops intended to take over British colonies in Africa while Britain itself was under attack.

The British navy retaliated by severely damaging the Italian fleet in its base at Taranto. Italian troops then invaded Egypt where they outnumbered the British and Dominion troops. Italian invasion was halted and its troops were rapidly driven back. They surrendered to the British commander. At the same time, the Italians were driven out of Ethiopia and the Emperor was restored.

In the early part of 1941 Hitler had to divert troops away from the invasion of Russia in order to prop up his ally Mussolini from February 1941 to August 1942. Rommel drove the British further and further back towards Egypt. These advances, however, did divert German soldiers and supplies from the Russian front and may have fatally weakened the German invasion forces.

Having taken Albania in 1939 Mussolini attacked Greece in 1941. Once again, he was defeated this time by combined Greek and British forces. Hitler had to step in. The German Blitzkrieg rapidly overran Yugoslavia and Greece. Paratroopers captured Crete for Germany. Yugoslavia was split up and puppet governments set up; Greece was occupied by Italy. Highly active resistance movements kept German troops busy and were a drain on German resources.

OPERATION BARBAROSSA.

The German attack on Russia was launched in June 1941. Hitler felt that he must succeed. Russia had been defeated many times before. The Soviet army had been weakened by Stalin's purges of 1937 to 1938. Many of the peoples under Soviet rule would welcome the Germans as liberators.

The Blitzkrieg on Russia thrust forward in three directions:

In the north, to Leningrad, to cut off possible aid from the Allies.

In the centre, to Moscow, the centre of government and transport networks.

In the south to the grain-growing areas, the industrial Donbas region and the Soviet oil fields beyond.

Stalin had put all his hopes on buying peace through the Nazi-Soviet Pact. German forces had to travel hundreds of kilometres away from Germany. Keeping the frontline troops supplied became a problem. The retreating Soviets were ordered by Stalin to leave nothing which the Germans could use. This was called a "scorched-earth" policy. The Soviets soldiers put up the stiffest resistance whenever possible, then removed all they could, mined the area and retreated again. Sometimes Soviets behind the German lines sabotaged the Germans' long supplies lines; these were called partisans, the killed Germans without mercy and the German took savage reprisals, sometimes on innocent peasants.

The German forces had almost reached their targets by November 1941. Then the Russian winter set in. Transport now became impossible. Just before Christmas in 1941 the Soviet Marshall counter-attacked and drove the Germans back to Moscow.

The war at sea.

This was the battle between German U-boats and British shipping. After the early U-boat successes, the merchant ships sailed in groups, called convoys, each with a naval escort.

Convoys would assemble off the coast of Canada and take a northerly route to Britain. Similar convoys were sent into the icy waters of north of Norway carrying supplies to the USSR. A group would attack a convoy from all sides, making the job of the escort impossible.

USA and LEND-LEASE.

President Roosevelt made it clear that Britain could buy equipment, but that it would be on a strictly 'cash and carry' basis. In 1940, he again promised Americans that they wouldn't have to fight. After winning the election, Roosevelt took a more helpful attitude to Britain. In 1941, he organised a scheme called 'Lend-Lease', by which Britain could borrow or hire military equipment. In December 1941 the Japanese attacked the American base at Pearl Harbour.

Roosevelt 'the First', immediately declared war on Germany and Japan. The USA was now on Britain's side.

The Battle of the Atlantic had gone well for Germany in 1941 and early 1942.

When America came into the war, however, things were not so easy for Germany. Convoys could be more heavily protected. Long-range aircraft were able to take off from America to guard convoys and try to spot U-boats. Gradually, the tide turned and the U-boats began to be sunk in great numbers.

The HOME FRONT.

Was it a people's war?

It had to be a "People's war" in order to be won. It went further than the First World War in involving everybody. This was a war of technology, making weapons was therefore as important as using them, so factory workers were on 'front—line'. It was a people's war because people were killed in their own homes in bombing raids. Also, because people's everyday lives were disrupted as never before, by evacuation, by shortages of food, by being ordered what to do by the government. Britain was second only to the USSR in being organised for 'Total War'. If people had refused to join in people's war, Britain would have been defeated.

Evacuation.

Plans were made to evacuate all children and disabled people from cities to rural areas. Some made arrangements, often going to the USA or Canada. By the end of September one-third of the British people had moved home. Evacuees tell of being offered around like in a slave auction. Most of all, it gave country dwellers some idea of how poverty had hit some city children in the 1930s. In this way evacuation contributed to the call for change after the war.

The Blitz.

When German bombing of British cities started in late August 1940 it was: better, because there were actually fewer casualties than the planners had feared; worse, because the bombing of cities, with their tightly packed housing, meant that so many houses were destroyed. For every civilian killed, 35 were made homeless.

SHELTERING.

The government-built surface shelters were unpopular. They were cold, insanitary and not safe. Anderson shelters, made of two curved pieces of corrugated iron embedded in the ground, were widely used. People could stay in their own garden and the shelters survived everything except a direct hit.

Many Londoners felt that the tube stations would be a good place to shelter, but they were, at first, forbidden to use them. Sheer pressure of people forced London Transport to open up the stations to shelters.

Rationing.

Sixty per cent of the food British people ate in peacetime came from abroad.

Soon after the war started goods from Europe were not available; items from Canada and the East had to run through the U-boat blockade. At first shortages meant higher prices. This was unfair in a "people's war" and rationing was introduced in January 1940. Everyone had a ration book with a certain number of 'coupons' for essential items. It took a lot of organising, usually by the women in households, to make the system work. Meals were boring, but nutritious and rationing was regarded as fair. Households were also encouraged to 'Dig for Victory' by growing their-own food.

Women and the war.

In 1941 all unmarried women between 20 and 30 could be called up to war work. In 1942 19-year-olds were added. Married women were not called up but could volunteer. In July 1943 all women up to the age of 51 were registered for employment. Women were either working or in the forces - the A-T-S (Auxiliary Territorial Service), the W-A-A-F (Women's Auxiliary Air Force) or the WRNS (Women's Royal Naval Service).

Women married to servicemen found it difficult to manage on the pay so looked for work.

Employers reluctantly gave more flexible hours for women so that they could shop or look after their children. Women were paid less than men for the same work and received less compensation for injuries.

The bombing of Germany.

Allied bombing of Germany was intended to weaken the German war effort. Industrial regions like the Ruhr and cities like Hamburg and Cologne suffered heavy bombing during the years from 1942 to 1945. This was a help to the Allies, especially when they were advancing on Germany after 1944.

During 1943 and 1944, when the Allied bombing of German factories was heaviest, industrial production actually increased.

TURNING POINTS from 1942 to 1945.

North Africa.

In the spring of 1942, the Soviets were still bearing the full force of the German attack. They called upon the Allies to distract Germany by invading Europe and opening up a 'Second Front'. A full-scale invasion of the northern Europe would demand more forces than the Allies had available. Churchill was particularly keen to attack in North Africa, and persuaded Roosevelt that this was a good idea. This plan was called Operation Torch. For two years of 1942 and 1943, North Africa and the Mediterranean were the main battlefields for the Allied troops. The only direct attacks on the European mainland were the commando raid on Dieppe in 1942 and the RAF bombing raids on Germany.

The BATTLE of.

The North African campaign began with a two-sided attack on the German forces in North Africa. In the east, in Egypt, the British army was bringing together reinforcements under a new commander, General Montgomery. In October 1942 he attacked. This time, the British had bigger forces. Soon, he was chasing Rommel westwards towards Libya and Tunisia. Rommel was really too far advanced for his own supplies to reach him. Hitler wouldn't let Rommel retreat. The Germans were also having to divert all the men and supplies they could spare to the Russian front. A shortage of oil was beginning to hold them back. Britain now had a rich new ally in the USA.

OPERATION TORCH.

In the west of North Africa, Operation Torch was launched. American and British troops invaded Morocco and Algeria. The Vichy French forces surrendered after a day, and the Allied forces advanced east towards Tunis. The actual advance on Tunis wasn't completed until May 1943.

ITALY INVADED.

This was followed up by the Allied invasion of Sicily, then Italy. Mussolini was dismissed by the Italian government. In a daring German commando raid Mussolini was then captured and taken to north Italy. There, a puppet republic was formed with Mussolini as its head. As 1943 came to an end therefore, the Allies were still well south of Rome, fighting a tough, reorganised German defence. Meanwhile the Italian only wanted peace. The Battle of the Atlantic was turning against Germany.

STALINGRAD.

The main Soviet resistance was at Stalingrad, where the city became the toughest battlefield of the war. The winter of 1942-1943 made things worse for the German. Then the Soviets broke through the German line to the west and south of Stalingrad, The Germans' supply line was now cut off. German General von Paulus asked Hitler for permission to surrender to save the lives of what men he had left, Hitler refused. In February 1943, von Paulus surrendered.

The Soviet advance stopped in March 1943. Hitler counter-attacked with tanks at Kursk in July. After another battle the German attack was halted. Soviets' heavy tanks pushed westwards, followed by the masses of the Red Army, living almost without supplies.

The. CONFERENCE.

In 1943, Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill met in. They agreed that the western Allies would invade western Europe in 1944. Stalin promised to help USA against Japan once Germany was defeated. The USSR was promised land at the expense of Poland; Poland was to be compensated at the expense of Germany.

The NORMANDY LANDINGS in 1944.

The main event of this year was the Allied invasion of France in June. Although the German were expecting an invasion, they could not defend the whole coastline, from Holland and. all the time. In early June decoy invasion preparations were made along the narrow part of the Channel, between Dover and Calais. The main invasion was then launched on the beaches of Normandy. It was a massive combined the United States and Britain operation. The invasion was successful. The Allied forces pressed on inland with some hard fighting. In August 1944, the Resistance staged a rising in Paris.

An attempt to move rapidly across the Rhine and into Germany after dropping British paratroops on Arnhem was a costly failure. By September, however, the Allies had freed most of France and Belgium. The main German hope was pinned on their rocket-launched bombs. The V1s, or 'doodle-bugs', were launched In June, followed In September by the supersonic V-Zs each carrying a ton of explosive Several thousand Londoners were killed. In July 1944, there was a plot to assassinate Hitler. A bomb was painted in his map-room. It exploded but failed to kill him. Five thousand Germans were rounded up and executed as a result of this.

The BATTLE of The.

The lull in the Allied advance in the autumn gave the Germans a chance to counterattack. In December 1944 they advanced in the Ardennes area, causing the Allies to retreat. The Germans' lack of supplies and the strength of Allies air support brought the advance to a halt early in 1945.

The Eastern Front.

In 1944, the Allies entered Rome and Florence. The Soviets made huge advances in the east. In the north, the siege of Leningrad had ended. All along the line south to Black Sea, the German retreated. The Soviet advance drove the Germans out of Russia and into Poland. When the Soviets reached the outskirts of Warsaw, the Polish Resistance rose in revolt. The uprising was put down by the German with great savagery. The Soviets have been accused of allowing the Polish Resistance to die so that they could take over Poland more easily.

In the south, too, the Soviet forces drove the Germans out of Russia. The Soviet army was responsible for ending Nazi rule in most of southern and eastern Europe. Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia were occupied by Soviet troops. In Yugoslavia the Resistance partisans, led by Tito, played a large part in defeating the Germans. By the end of 1944, Germany's enemies were pressing in on all sides.

The End of The THIRD REICH.

The Yalta Conference.

Early in 1945, the Allied leaders met at Yalta, in southern Russia. It was the last time Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin would meet. They agreed that Germany, once defeated, would be divided into four zones. Three of them would be occupied by USSR, USA and Britain. The fourth zone should go to France.

The problem of the boundaries in eastern Europe was also discussed. The Red Army was already in occupation of most of eastern Europe. The best they could do was to get Stalin to promise to hold free elections in eastern Europe once the war was over.

The fall of Germany.

Germany's resistance was weakened by the massive air-raids on its cities. Such raids did little to stop the production of war materials, but the German people realised that defeat was unavoidable.

In the west, the Allies were held up by the Rhine. From there, the British and Canadians advanced into north Germany while the Americans pushed into central and southern Germany and Austria.

The Soviets pressed westwards, reaching Berlin and beyond. As the allies advanced, they came to the concentration camps, and the full horror Nazi rule became clear.

Adolf Hitler had retired to his deep under-ground bunker in Berlin. There, he got married to Eva Braun and then committed suicide together. Admiral Doenitz took over as leader of Germany. He tried to make a separate peace with the USA and Britain, but they refused, and the war in Europe ended on 7 May 1945.